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New Policies for the Animal Rabies Lay Vaccinator Program

Background

Vaccinating pets against rabies is a long-standing public health intervention that decreases human exposure to rabies virus by preventing pets from contracting rabies from wildlife reservoirs and subsequently transmitting the virus to humans. In the 1970s, the Section of Epidemiology (SOE) created the Lay Vaccinator (LV) program, which certifies qualified lay persons to administer rabies vaccine to dogs and cats.¹ The LV program was ultimately designed to reduce the risk of rabies exposure to Alaskans by increasing access to animal rabies vaccination services.

In most of northern and western Alaska, rabies is enzootic – always present in animals at a low level – among fox populations. Prior to the LV program, there was no reliable means for obtaining animal rabies vaccinations in enzootic areas. Therefore, the LV program served as a public health intervention to help prevent human exposures in areas where the risk of exposure to rabies virus is relatively high. Conversely, in many non-enzootic areas of Alaska, the risk of exposure to rabies virus is low, and now professional veterinary and animal control services are often available for vaccinating dogs and cats.

In the past year, a thorough examination of the public health purpose and effectiveness of the LV program coupled with the high number of dogs that contracted rabies in enzootic areas, prompted SOE to revise the governing policies for the LV program. The most substantial revision improves program efficiency by focusing limited resources on rabies enzootic areas, which have historically had limited or no access to rabies vaccination services. The 2007 policies are outlined below.

2007 SOE LV Program Policies

Sponsorship

- LVs must be nominated by a sponsor. Appropriate sponsors include Alaska-licensed veterinarians, Alaska Native health corporations, government-supported animal control agencies, and public safety offices.
- Requests for LV certification should be submitted in writing to SOE and should indicate the need for rabies vaccination services within a designated area and the qualifications of the nominee.

Expectations

- LVs are expected to competently administer rabies vaccines to animals in their region of service. Vaccinations must be offered to all animal owners without discrimination. LVs may not refuse to vaccinate an animal unless the animal is anticipated to cause them injury.
- LVs are expected, whenever possible, to assist SOE or regional environmental health officers with animal bite investigations.

Region of Service

- LVs will only be certified to provide services in communities that are in areas where rabies is transmitted among local non-bat species of mammals. Although domestic animals have acquired rabies from bats, human cases of bat strain rabies have been acquired only after direct contact with bats. Vaccinating pets against rabies is unlikely to greatly impact the incidence of human infection with bat strains of rabies. Rabies enzootic areas include the following boroughs and census areas: Aleutians East and West, Bethel, Bristol Bay, Dillingham, Lake and Peninsula, Nome, North Slope, Northwest Arctic, Wade Hampton, and Yukon-Koyukuk.

- In general, most LVs will only be certified to vaccinate animals in a single village. However, in special circumstances, regions of service may be multiple villages or jurisdictions.

Term of Service

- LVs are initially appointed for a period of 1 year. Thereafter, certificates may be renewed every 2 years.
- To renew an LV's certification, sponsors must submit a written request to SOE. This request should indicate that 1) there is an ongoing need in the region for rabies vaccination services; 2) the LV is competently providing those services; and 3) the LV is operating within the scope of SOE's LV program.
- On a case-by-case basis, LV certificates may be issued for short-term periods as needed.

Training and Supplies

- The sponsor is required to ensure that all LVs under their supervision have received appropriate training on methods of vaccine administration, storage and handling, safe use and disposal of syringes, and methods of record keeping.
- The sponsor will provide all needed supplies (e.g., rabies vaccine, syringes, certificate books and metal tags) to the LVs under their supervision. LVs should be informed that their sponsor is their initial point of contact for all questions about supplies, regional rabies vaccination databases, etc.

Restrictions

- LVs are authorized to administer ONLY the rabies vaccine provided by SOE.
- LVs are not compensated by the State of Alaska for their duties. Vaccinations must be given free-of-charge.
- Only certified LVs may administer the rabies vaccine to animals. Vaccine is NEVER to be provided to an animal's owner or another third party for unsupervised administration at some time in the future.
- LVs are not authorized under their LV certificate to administer any other vaccines nor to deliver any animal care-related services that could be construed as "practicing veterinary medicine" as defined by AS 08.98 or 12 AAC.68.²
- Any unprofessional action or conduct by an LV in violation of the policies outlined here will be reviewed by SOE and may result in revocation of an LV certificate.

Summary

The LV program is crucial for ongoing rabies control in Alaska. LVs face many challenges in trying to ensure that animals in their jurisdiction are vaccinated against rabies. With this new phase of the LV program, SOE will be working more closely with the LVs in rabies enzootic areas and with their sponsors to devise approaches to achieving better protection of pets, and thereby humans, against rabies in Alaska.

References and Notes

1. State of Alaska Epidemiology *Bulletin*, "Rabies Control Program – Lay Vaccinator Program." June 14, 1991. Available at: http://www.epi.alaska.gov/bulletins/docs/b1991_12.htm.
2. Veterinary Statutes and Regulations. Available from the State of Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development, Division of Corporations, Business and Professional Licensing. Available at: <http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/occ/pub/VeterinaryStatutes.pdf>.